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### **Blair backs solar power plan for world's poor**

G8: leaders agree on drive to harness renewable energy and improve health for two billion people in the Third World

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The world's most powerful leaders plan to announce today an unprecedented drive to boost solar power as the result of an extraordinary exercise in open government by Tony Blair.

The drive – to be launched at the G8 summit in Okinawa – is designed to help bring electricity to the two billion people of the Third World who are without it, and to achieve a quantum leap in the development and use of renewable energy. It is to be a joint exercise between the world's largest economies and business. A leading executive from an energy company is likely to be asked to chair it alongside a top government official.

Mr Blair has successfully persuaded his fellow leaders to adopt the plan after getting the idea from opening up preparations for the summit in a way no leader has ever attempted.

Traditionally leaders have kept the summit preparations close to their chests, largely excluding senior civil servants from the process. But last autumn Mr Blair invited a group of academics, environmentalists, experts and journalists to Downing Street to come up with ideas on the environment and Third World development that could be presented to the leaders in Okinawa.

The group suggested the renewable energy drive as a way of meeting the needs of the world's poorest people while at the same time combating global warming. Most of the poorest people live far beyond the reach of existing electricity grids. And even if it was possible to provide them with power by conventional means, the extra fossil fuels that would have to be burned would sharply increase the amount of carbon dioxide emitted, doing irreparable damage to the climate.

Solar, wind and water power are, in contrast, delivered free by nature and often most abundantly in developing countries. Developing renewables, the group argues, would not only avoid increasing carbon dioxide emissions, but would reduce their cost and make it possible for them to gain new markets worldwide.

As the poorest get electricity more jobs would be produced, general health and education would improve, and demand – one of the main causes of soil erosion – would drop. What's more, even population growth would slow. This is both because people would become less poor, but also because they would spend less time in the dark.

The plan was first taken up by the G8 environment ministers and then by the leaders themselves. As a first step, the leaders are to set up a small taskforce, headed by a top businessman and an Italian government minister, to work out what barriers there might be to greatly increasing the use of renewable energy in the Third World – and how to overcome them. The group would meet first in September and report to the next G8 summit in Genoa next summer.

The plan is that most of the finance would come from business, but the leaders are also considering how public money, including aid, could best be used to support it. Their aim is to achieve "a step-change in the level of supply, distribution and use of renewable energy for sustainable development worldwide".